

The Marine Air-Ground Team: Still Not Adequately Training for the Urban Fight

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Still Not Adequately Training for the Urban Fight

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to

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Introduction

Long before General Krulak introduced the concept of the "three block war" in 1997, the Marine Corps has seen the urban battlefield on the horizon. Since the end of the Second World War, both the number of urban areas and the total number of urban dwellers has continued to increase. Dynamics among the varying cultures in these urban areas have proven to be one of the most destabilizing forces in the world today. From the European front in WWII; to the battle for Hue City, Vietnam; to Operation Restore Hope in Mogadishu, Somalia; to the battle for Fallujah, Iraq; the United States Marine Corps has found itself immersed in the urban fight. Yet despite the ever increasing number of urban conflicts, the United States Marine Corps is failing to provide its aviators and forward air controllers the training and facilities necessary to develop and execute efficient urban close air support tactics, techniques, and procedures.

The urban battlefield is full of countless challenges and threats. The Marine air ground task force (MAGTF) has continued to subdue these threats. Although the Marine Corps has a tradition of adapting to overcome the evolving challenges of urban conflict, it has failed to properly prepare its air-ground team to address those challenges more efficiently. The Marine

Corps prides itself on its expert use of combined arms to "close with and destroy the enemy." A cornerstone in the combined arms concept is the use of close air support (CAS) integrated with ground maneuver. The ease of that integration, or lack of ease in integration, can be one of the greatest sources of friction on the battlefield.

Joint Publication 3-09.3 defines close air support (CAS) as "air action by fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft against hostile targets that are in close proximity to friendly forces and that requires detailed integration of each air mission with the fire and movement of those forces."¹ Two key elements of CAS are the proximity of air delivered fires to friendly forces and the requirement for detailed integration. The determining factor between the CAS and all other types of fires is the level of detailed integration required. In urban conflicts, nearly all fires are delivered "danger close," or within six hundred meters of friendly forces.² That fact, along with the additional complexities of the urban battlefield, only raises the level of detailed integration required. The time required for detailed integration can be expedited through proper training. The Marine Corps lacks the facilities and training required.

The Modern Migration to the Urban Battlefield

From 1950 until 2000, the number of urban dwellers more than tripled, growing from 737 million to 2.9 billion. By the year 2030, the total number of urban inhabitants is expected to exceed 4.9 billion. The population dynamics of ethnicity, religion, and quality of life are catalysts for many, if not all, of the world's "hot spots" today.³

During WWII, forty percent of the battles in the European theater took place in built up areas.⁴ Weather and rules of engagement precluded much of the use of CAS during the Battle for Hue City; however, the limited use of attack aircraft during the battle was a significant advantage to the U. S. Marines.⁵ Operation Restore Hope in Somalia, specifically Mogadishu, was a wake up call to the Marine Corps. The "three block war" had arrived, and the need for updated urban CAS tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) was clear and present.⁶ By the mid-1990's two things were evident: The modern battlefield had migrated to the urban environment and, regardless of the location of the next urban conflict, close air support would be a necessity. The Marine Corps, however, continued to train to tactics techniques and procedures designed to fight a Soviet force on a conventional, open battlefield.

Enemies of the United States have also observed the challenges that the urban battlefield brings. During the battle for An Nasariyah, Iraq in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) I, the enemy's defense was to draw the Marine Corps into the city in order to limit its combined arms capabilities. The Marines were able to adapt and overcome, but it was once again a Baptism by fire for those fighting street-to-street and providing CAS to those on the ground.⁷ The integration of fire and maneuver could have been a lesser challenge, had the aircrew and forward air controllers (FACs) had more training in urban fighting.

By November of 2004, the MAGTF was well prepared for the battle to reclaim Fallujah. However, the majority of those controlling air and providing CAS were veterans of OIF I with urban combat experience. Even with that level of experience, the battle exhibited all the enduring challenges of urban warfare.⁸ The Marine Corps is now faced with the challenge of preparing the next generation of aviators, who do not have that combat experience, for the inevitable urban fight.

Challenges of Urban Close Air Support

The urban battlefield is extremely complicated and fluid. While possessing all the characteristics of the natural landscape, the introduction of manmade features presents an

entirely unique arena for military operations.⁹ The third dimension of the urban area creates dilemmas for aviation and ground forces with respect to the identification of friendly and enemy locations and noncombatants, target marking and acquisition, and proximity of fires to friendlies and noncombatants.

The verticality of urban areas offers defilade to both friendly and enemy forces. Locating friendly or enemy positions from the air is extremely difficult without aircraft orbiting directly overhead, which puts aircrew at increased risk. That verticality also brings the enemy into the third dimension to share space with CAS aircraft.¹⁰ Also intermingled among the friendly and enemy forces in the urban environment are noncombatants.

After action reports from aircrew following the battle for Fallujah, Iraq in 2004 echo that the "high levels of clutter, and relative homogeneity of the battlefield [make] picking a target out of a densely populated city extremely difficult."¹¹ The requirement for aircraft to "hold" outside the built up urban area make a "talk-on" insufficient, if at all feasible. There is a heavy reliance for precise and accurate target marking. Aircrew have limited time "in the chute" to acquire the mark and the target, to locate friendly positions, and to deliver their ordnance accurately—roughly thirty to forty-five

seconds.¹² Proficiency and efficiency make the most of that time.

In the urban fight, only about five percent of targets are greater than one hundred meters from friendly positions, and about ninety percent are within fifty meters.¹³ The fact that almost all air delivered fires in the urban environment are danger close only increases the requirements for the positive identification of the target and the position of friendly forces. The increased reliability of precision-guided munitions (PGM) has lessened the risk to friendly forces and collateral damage, but the fact remains that proficiency requires training.

These challenges do not go away with time or training, but they are a critical aspect of the urban fight that aircrew and terminal controllers must be prepared to face. An increased focus on training for urban CAS would greatly increase its timeliness, accuracy, and efficiency.

USMC Urban Close Air Support Training & Readiness Requirements

The ACE MOUT Manual, published by Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics Squadron One (MAWTS-1), lists nine conditions for effective CAS:

1. Air Superiority
- 2. Aircrew and Terminal Controller skill**
3. Appropriate ordnance

4. Communications
5. Command and Control
6. Favorable Weather
- 7. Prompt Response**
8. Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses
- 9. Target Marking** ¹⁴

Aircrew and terminal controller skill, prompt response, and target marking are especially critical on the urban battlefield. Skill level of those calling for and those providing close air support is directly proportional to the level of training received. The greater the skill level obtained by FACs and aircrew, the more timely, effective, and efficient CAS becomes.

The ACE MOUT Manual calls for eight training requirements that are "necessary to train to the task [of urban CAS]:"

1. Training small unit leaders and individuals on tactical flexibility, decentralized C3, improved use in intelligence for tactical and small unit benefit and innovative tactics
2. Training on restrictive Rules of Engagement (ROE)
- 3. Training to prevent fratricide, especially target engagement by supporting arms.**
- 4. Increased and improved urban live-fire training facilities**
5. Virtual reality training aids
- 6. Increased training with PGMs**
7. Boilerplate ROE for lethal and non-lethal force to which forces can train
- 8. Unit peacetime training requirements for target identification and terminal control in urban environments** ¹⁵

Marine Aviation and Tactics Squadron One, the very source of these "requirements," is also responsible for updating and publishing aircrew Training and Readiness (T&R) manuals for aircrew training. Yet, there has been no increase in the

training requirements for urban CAS, nor has there been an increase or improvement in live-fire urban training facilities.

Of the four type-model-series (TMS) aircraft in the Marine Corps' inventory that provide CAS, each has only one T&R syllabus flight event dedicated to urban CAS. In the H-1 community, that single training event is at the 400-syllabus level, which means it is not a requirement for aircrew to complete.¹⁶ Both the AV-8 and F-18 T&R events are 300-syllabus level and are an annual requirement for aircrew.¹⁷ Regardless, a single flight is nowhere near the level of training called for by MAWTS-1 and today's urban battlefield.

The Forward Air Controllers do not receive any better training than aviators. The Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) School attended by Marine FACs focuses on medium to high threat scenarios set in an open battlefield. There is very little instruction on urban CAS and only familiarization training on the use of laser equipment used for marking.¹⁸ The Marine Corps is asking its air-ground team to prevail in a high friction environment without providing the requisite training.

USMC Urban CAS Training Facilities and Opportunities, or the lack-there-of

The Yodaville urban CAS range in Yuma, Arizona is the only training area readily available to the Marine Corps.²⁰

Geography and the high-tempo deployment cycle have negated the availability of Yodaville to those who would benefit most from its use. The only other urban CAS training opportunities occur during MEU work-ups at TRUEX and at the MOUT complexes, and those opportunities are limited to simulated CAS (sim-CAS) only. One FAC was quoted after Operation Phantom Fury: "We need to provide a training facility that captures how difficult it is to mark for CAS in the city. It is really, really hard and I hope nobody thinks that even after several hundred controls and city fight[ing] that we've got it down." ¹⁹

Despite its limitations, Yodaville is the only Marine Corps range that offers live-fire urban CAS. Unfortunately, the few aircrew that get to shoot on the range are either attending the Weapons and Tactics Instructor (WTI) course or the Desert Talon training exercise—both sponsored by MAWTS-1. These events are limited in attendance and range time, and the training focus remains diverted from the urban fight.

West coast squadrons have ready access to Yodaville, while the only opportunities for east coast squadrons to train on the

range occur during WTI or Desert Talon. The east coast needs a dedicated urban CAS range to facilitate peace-time training, without the need to ferry aircraft across the country to achieve the level of training required by the contemporary operating environment.

Conclusion

History and statistics have long given indicators of the battlefield's migration to urban areas, and the current conflict in Iraq has proven them right. Urban warfare is a fight fought at "danger close" ranges in a very tight battle space. Close air support must be delivered as accurately, quickly, and as safely as possible. A delayed time-on-target or missed target engagement can allow the enemy the opportunity to penetrate friendly lines and wreak havoc in the rear areas.

The Marine air-ground team has known great success in the delivery and integration of aerial fires. That is not to say that it has been easy. Marine aviators' knowledge and understanding of maneuver warfare, the fact that Marine FACs are all aviators, and the concept of adapting to overcome, have played key roles in that success. In order to further such success, the Marine Corps must have a greater focus on training its air-ground team for the urban fight, as well as provide its

aviators and FACs adequate, readily accessible live-fire training facilities. To say that the United States will never again battle against Soviet style tactics on the open battlefield would be foolish, but not training to fight for the reality of the urban battlefield and its many challenges is equally as foolish.

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